

Alon Confino

Germany, Nationhood, and the Holocaust, 1500–2000

Germany: A Nation in Its Time, Before, During, and After Nationalism, 1500–2000. By Helmut Walser Smith (New York, Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2020) 590 pp. \$39.95

The leading body of work in the historiography of nationhood in the last generation has explored modern national belonging as a cultural artifact, a product of invention and social engineering. Scholars investigated the process by which (some people in) the nation—as a social group made up of different groups, identities, and affinities—constructs a past and a sense of self through a process of creation, appropriation, and conflict, and what it means to power relationships within society. A key problem of method and interpretation was to trace how a new, modern national belonging was crafted from the available symbolic reservoir of society, how old and new cultural symbols commingled, and how they changed their meanings in a process famously articulated by Renan in *What is a Nation?*: “The essence of a nation is that all individuals have many things in common, and also that they have forgotten many things.”¹

This research agenda becomes significantly more challenging when the topic in question extends chronologically to explore how a given national group imagined and experienced itself over hundreds of years from the early modern period to the present: the symbolic reservoir available to the group is larger; the process of remembering

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1 See Ernest Renan, “What Is a Nation?” (1882), in *idem* (ed. and trans. M. F. N. Giglioliin), *What Is a Nation? And Other Political Writings* (New York, 2018) 247–263.

and forgetting more complex; and the changing mentalities of space, time, and collectivity more dramatic, as is the changing political meaning of nationhood. Does any continuous national sense of self persist throughout such an extended time period, and if so, what exactly is it? What were the common denominators, if any, real or imagined, that gave the people of this group a sense of shared collectivity? This is a research agenda with a tall order, and it explains why few studies in the historiography of nations and nationalism have taken it up.

Such is the task of Smith's *Germany: A Nation and Its Time*, however, in its attempt to tell the story of nation and nationalism in Germany from 1500 to 2000. It is an audacious book—bold in its chronological arc, erudite across five centuries, and eminently capable of keeping its narrative flowing and accessible throughout its nearly 500 pages. It raises important questions: How are historians to tell this history? What are the historical elements that give this history coherence, if they exist at all? What is the relationship between continuity and change and between contingency and structure that give it meaning? Furthermore, since the nation in question is Germany, what was the place of the Third Reich and the Holocaust in this *longue durée*?

Smith is particularly suitable to undertake such an investigation; he explored these topics in earlier studies. One of them, *The Continuities of German History*, called for a German history that does not shy away “from considering chronological depth and the historical connections across long spans of time. . . . I am interested in how the centuries connect in German history and in particular how it is possible to think about historical change over long periods of time . . . [and how it is possible] to construct bridges across chronological chasms.”² His new book tries to answer this call.

At the center of this review essay—which first discusses how to think about the continuity and change of the nation and then how to deal with Nazi Germany and the Holocaust—is the question, How does Smith juggle chronological depth, continuity, and historical change in telling about Germany from 1500 to 2000. The tensions between these elements, as well as between this book and Smith's earlier studies that explore the topic, are what make this book illuminating, while also defining its weaknesses.

2 Smith, *The Continuities of German History: Nation, Religion, and Race across the Long Nineteenth Century* (New York, 2008), 3–4, 6. Smith also edited the *Oxford Handbook of Modern German History* (New York, 2011), which covers 1760 to the present.

Germany: A Nation and Its Time explores “how Germans imagined and experienced their nation” (xii). It argues that the concept of the German nation did not have a “transhistorical” meaning but that “across five centuries, there were radically different ways of knowing, representing, and experiencing the German nation” (xi). This argument follows a leading interpretative tradition from the last generation that has viewed nations and nationhood as a cultural and political artifact. But Smith is also part of a corrective approach that challenged the view that the modern nation is an invention emerging from the era that followed the French Revolution. Placing the modern German nation within its antecedents, Smith argues—against Gellner’s celebrated observation that “it is nationalism which engenders nations, not the other way around”—that modern German nationalism did not invent the German nation.³ Thus, modern German nationalism, particularly its radical phase of Nazism and genocide, was an experiential variation of the idea of the German nation, not the thing itself.

The book is divided into five parts. Part I, “The Nation Before Nationalism,” which covers the years from 1500 to 1700, describes how Germans imagined the nation via a cartographical representation of its cities, towns, and countryside. Germany was a geographical space loosely framed by the Holy Roman Empire; the shift was to imagine Germany as a two-dimensional mapped space. A “deepening sense of a German nation” (Smith uses this phrase several times) ensued (33).

Part II, “The Copernican Turn,” follows several new ways of imagining the nation between 1700 and 1815. The first innovation was the patriotism that emerged within the individual German states of Prussia, Bavaria, and others, often treating them as nations in their own right. Germans expected Central Europe to be divided into a series of small fatherlands. The second innovation, spearheaded by late eighteenth-century travel reports and by the Romantic imagination, was the construal of Germany as integral to personal identity. The third innovation was the rise of nationalism as a sentiment about the nation.

Part III, “The Age of Nationalism,” describes the further ascendance of nationalism in the period from the Congress of Vienna to the outbreak of World War I, though nationalism still remained a

3 Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (New York, 1983), 55.

“particular, not yet dominant way of thinking about what the nation was, is, or could be” (195). For the majority of Germans, other sources of identity were more important, many of them indifferent to nationalism. But a dynamic process of nationalization of German culture followed the unification of Germany in 1871.

Part IV takes the story to “The Nationalist Age” between 1914 to 1945, when nationalism became the central ideology, turning radical in 1933. Finally, Part V, “After Nationalism,” focuses on post-1945 West Germany and on the post-1990 reunification. It explores how the memory of the Third Reich and the Holocaust became part of the nation’s own history, making an argument about “how a nation summons compassion” (xiv).

Smith weaves this story with confidence and verve, placing it within a general political history through the use of an impressively wide array of sources—from early modern cartography to works by literati, intellectuals, historians, and travel writers and from monuments to Holocaust diaries and twenty-first-century polling data. Some scholars may quibble that he fails to mention important studies on this or that given topic or that the book has no bibliography, but any such flaws are petty given the breadth of knowledge that Smith demonstrates. He has been a scholar of Germany long enough to earn the trust that he has read much more than he cites. This is a scholarly book suitable for the general public. Some of Smith’s points directed to a broad readership will hardly surprise scholars (such as the argument that the appreciation of the nation in the sixteenth century was not a sign of the chauvinistic superiority that resulted in the Third Reich). Nor will they always win scholars’ approval (such as the argument that historians have not fully appreciated how the 1980s and 1990s were decisive for Germans’ internalization of the Holocaust) (57, 412). Writing a book that can appeal to scholars as well as to a general public is hardly easy; Smith has shown a mastery of such storytelling.

At the outset, Smith outlines his three main arguments about the German nation from 1500 to 2000 and its shifting periods. The first argument is, as noted, that Germany had no preconceived destiny; Germans’ view of it changed with time. Despite the importance of the other two arguments, this one is the most revealing about the overall story of how the German nation changed over time. The second argument is that in contrast to the prevalent notion of Germany as particularly militaristic, peace has been as prevalent in Germany, and

as important to German nationhood, as has war. The third argument, which pertains to the final chapter of the book, addresses the “defining moment of compassion implied in national belonging,” as Germans came to own the genocide that they perpetrated (xiv). Although this argument is hardly new, “summoning compassion” is an elegant way to describe contemporary German memory. These last two arguments, however, do not augment our understanding about the “radically different ways of knowing, representing, and experiencing the German nation.”

The main question is, Does this book present a whole that is bigger than the sum of its parts? Smith has been much more successful in describing the different national periods than in providing a sense of connection between these periods. If a discursive and geographical (and later a political) entity (or entities) called *Germany* ever existed, however mercurial it might have been, we should be able to explore the nation not only in all of its different guises but also the common denominators that gave it a unified appearance. Even if these common denominators were in the realm of the imagination, were subject to change, or were merely cultural creations (*inventions* would be a good synonym), they would have given Germans a sense of abiding collectivity. Germans had a reservoir of symbols and images from which they could pick and choose to conceive of the nation, and ultimately discard and replace, to create a new reservoir for those who came later. If nationalists did not invent the nation *ex nihilo* but recrafted it, what was their source? What did they take from previous German culture to mold into a new conception of the nation? What is missing in the book is the process of transformation, whereby each period appropriated elements from previous conceptions of the nation in the process of building new ones. The book as a whole portrays the different periods as more isolated than connected.

This approach would be legitimate if Smith had argued that his parceled narrative framework matched how Germans experienced and understood the nation throughout its history—sometimes with long connecting bridges between past and present and at other times with no connecting bridges at all, depending on the specific era, group, or locality in question. Such an argument, if supported by evidence, might well be convincing. But Smith does not make it, at least not explicitly. Instead, he argues convincingly against a particular kind of continuity in German history—a pre-Nazi or militaristically

nationalist one. But it is not clear what he is proposing in its place. Presumably, Smith's exploration of the different ways in which Germans experienced the nation does not imply that each phase was independent of what preceded or followed it: Shared commonalities, real or invented, allowed Germans, like all nationals, to think of themselves as part of a collective (however they defined it at different times). Yet this sense of transformation does not emerge from the book. On one level, the continuity is implicit; Something was always felt and seen as the German nation, and it embodied a sense of an inherited history, a German nation continually given new form in different geographical, historical, and expansionist contexts. But on another level, the book highlights the discontinuities, particularly after 1815, dimming the sense of a shared feeling and seeing, real or invented.

To understand nationhood, we need to explain both long-term distinctions and common denominators, some persistent overtime even while changing but most crafted anew by each generation to give meaning to the present. Smith covers some big transformations well until 1815, but he is less successful with the more subtle mentalities and cultural constructs of this period, which are really the subject of the book. In 1500, Germans had a sense of a distant past of the nation (in the manner of the Roman historian Tacitus) but no sense of a shared future.⁴ By 1800, however, nationalism (in the manner of Herder or Fichte) infused the nation with a sense of future possibilities and horizontal kinship.⁵ In 1500, inclusion and exclusion was mainly "a spatial or geographical question (was Trier a French or a German city)," while in 1800, the issue of who belonged in the nation and who did not, ethnically, religiously, and the like, was, beyond space, a matter of identity (89). These insights, which are part of a lucid introductory text that precedes Part II, reveal what is obscure in the narrative. In Part I and II, the nation at times falls out of focus in the discussion of mapmaking and of military and diplomatic history, and of the writing of intellectuals and literati.

4 For ideas in Publius Cornelius Tacitus, see *Germania* (98 A.D.), which characterized Germanic people in a manner that often resonated with later German nationalism. Christopher Krebs, *A Most Dangerous Book: Tacitus's Germania From the Roman Empire to the Third Reich* (New York, 2011), finds it to have been especially influential on the Nazis.

5 For the cultural nationalism of Johann Gottfried von Herder, see, for example, *Auch eine Philosophie für die Geschichte der Menschheit* (Yet Another Philosophy of the History of Mankind) (Berlin, 1774); for Johann Gottlieb Fichte's view, *Reden an die deutsche Nation* (Addresses to the German Nation) (Berlin, 1808).

The process of national transformation loses focus in the modern period. The chapter about the new nation-state during the German Empire (1871–1914) illustrates the problem of how to place a new conception of the nation within prior thinking about it. The unification of Germany in 1871 was a radical political and experiential departure. It joined nation, society, and state within a single territory, redefining the spatial and historical dimensions of the nation as well as Germans' memory of their pasts and anticipation of their future. It presents Smith with a unique opportunity to account for the interplay between radical change placed within more familiar cultural patterns. He is right in his intent to explore what “made the nation seem to ordinary Germans as natural as the air they breathed” (262). But the discussion of, among other things, monuments for Emperor William I and Otto von Bismarck or of material objects that represented the new nation-state does not capture how Germans created a new identity within an existing tradition. Smith depicts Germany after 1871 as so different from its incarnation in earlier decades and centuries that he seems to be writing a new book. If the conception of the nation had become totally different, Smith should explain why it diverged so dramatically from previous periods, but if it was different while carrying over old meanings, he should explain how it related to old conceptions of the nation. Smith does not show how Germans internalized this new, finite national space and created a new national memory.

The book delineates each of the phases in the changing experience of the nation between 1815 and 1945 much better by its new elements (often political or military) than by any sense of national commonality that transcended radical political and social changes. This appeal to commonality is not intended to suggest the discovery of long-term causes for, say, the Third Reich in back centuries but those shared elements that each period used, misused, invented anew, and appropriated as it saw fit. Smith chose not to use the extensive scholarship on German memory and identity, particularly for the post-1871 modern period, to show how Germans molded the national past and present through remembering, forgetting, and appropriating. It would have tremendously added a dimension of the passing of time that is vital to this book.

In an earlier study, *The Butcher's Tale: Murder and Anti-Semitism in a German Town* (New York, 2002)—the history of a ritual murder accusation against Jews in the eastern Prussian town of Konitz in

1900—Smith advances two ways to explore chronological depth and historical change, long-term *script* and contingent *process*. Smith places the events in Konitz within a *longue durée* of Christian–Jewish relations: “Not the Jews but their Christian accusers performed the ritual murder. This reversal, I would submit, is the key that gives us access to the meaning of the events in Konitz. Just as it unlocks the motivation behind the telling of the butcher’s tale, it reveals the hidden script of the blood libel that bedeviled Christian relations with Jews for nearly a millennium.”⁶ The actions of the people of Konitz were determined by a script of ritual murder that originated in 1150, the first documentation of an antisemitic accusation of ritual murder. The term *script* implies a kind of libretto, about which Herzen observed in the nineteenth century, “If history followed a set libretto it would lose all interest, become unnecessary, boring, ludicrous.... history is all improvisation, all will, all extempore—there are no frontiers, no itineraries.”⁷

Smith is too good a historian to suggest a simplistic, unchangeable persistence of antisemitism from the Middle Ages to 1900, although he does posit a script that appears (“rest[s] in repose”) and reappears over a thousand years.⁸ Complementing this pillar of the book, the idea of historical *script*, is Smith’s explanatory notion of *process*, which analyzes the meaning of antisemitism within the specific conditions of 1900 Konitz and the German Empire, placing people’s agency and historical contingency at the center.⁹ *The Butcher’s Tale* holds script and process—the interpretive notions that capture common denominators and changes across centuries—in tension without resolving them. This tension is fundamental to all historical experience and explanation; historians can never fully resolve this tension, while they juggle its elements in various interpretations according to context.

In *Germany: A Nation and Its Time*, Smith seems to abandon the notion of *script*—that is, using his own words, the attempt “to construct bridges across chronological chasms”—in favor of explicating different national conceptions within their specific conditions. His exploration of 500 years of German history lacks the bridges that

6 Smith, *Butcher’s Tale*, 180.

7 See, in a slightly different translation, Alexander Herzen (trans. Moura Budberg), *From the Other Shore* (London, 1956), 39.

8 Smith, *Butcher’s Tale*, 106.

9 *Ibid.*, 22.

connected the different national phases; it misses the sense of a nation over time. Short-term causes also make sense within longer lineages, whether real or invented. Smith's abandoning of a script that appears and reappears is correct in terms of historical explanation. But if history has no libretto, nationals do create their own national librettos to give meaning to their nation in its time. The sense of the past, which is crucial to understanding this 500 years of history, does not shine through Smith's story of Germany; the book does not pay attention to the fundamental ways by which Germans in each period wrestled with the past of their nation—ignoring, embracing, and rejecting it—in order to craft a new present and future. Perhaps because of this missed opportunity, *Germany: A Nation and Its Time* is a book without an argument. It has arguments about the given periods—and it is an impressive account—but it has no argument about nations, nationalism, or Germany beyond the assertion that “across five centuries, there were radically different ways” to experience the German nation.

The interpretive consequences of Smith's approach come into sharp focus in his two chapters about the Third Reich and the Holocaust, one covering 1933 to 1941 and the other 1941 to 1945. The main topic of these chapters is the persecution and extermination of the Jews, while Smith also discusses other groups of victims, including the Poles and Soviet prisoners of war, as well as the Nazi universe of camps and death. These chapters about the Third Reich are well informed and well written, though not new, and sometimes poignant in their use of the diaries and letters of perpetrators and victims. But they have little to say about how Germans experienced the nation in this period. The almost exclusive focus on the treatment of the Jews seems to leave the Third Reich unexplainable, even surprising, unconnected to earlier conceptions of the German nation. This narrative creates the impression of extracting the Third Reich from the story of Germany, though Smith could hardly have intended it so.

The persecution and extermination of the Jews in the Third Reich was at the heart of Nazism in peace and war from its very start in 1933. Smith describes this process but does not explain it within the broader context of how Germans understood the nation in this period of radical change. He ignores topics that were equally, and sometimes more, important for Germans in their experience of the nation. The Third Reich faced Germans with the task of imagining their nation, for the first time in history, as a European empire; the

only real antecedent was the plan for annexation in World War I. On January 1, 1941, the nation turned empire ruled over Berlin, Vienna, Prague, Warsaw, Oslo, Copenhagen, Amsterdam, Brussels, and Paris. Most Germans believed the war would soon be over following the massive German military successes. How did Germans imagine this empire, and how did they connect it to the persecution and extermination of Jews and others? What new national horizons did the Nazis make possible, and impossible, in their policies about Jews and in their aspirations to a German-dominated continent based on enslavement and extermination?

Important to this inquiry is an investigation of what might have occurred on “a continent scarred by concentration camps, ghettos, and killing sites” in the event of a Nazi victory (402). The answers to the questions above are far from simple because they meant different things to different Germans at different moments along the short twelve years of the Third Reich. Supporting the idea of one’s neighborhood free of Jews in the prewar Nazi years was different from learning (or not knowing) about the mass killings in the east or of thinking (or refusing to think) about the murder of Jews in one’s bombed city. The Third Reich engendered among many Germans considerable pride in, allegiance to, and identification with the nation; these sentiments, which are also part of the story of the period, complicate an account of the perpetrations of crimes. Smith’s Holocaust-centered account of the Third Reich is insufficient to capture what the nation, and the Holocaust within it, meant to Germans during this period.

The Third Reich brought to the national imagination, among other things, the nexus of nation and empire, nation and colonialism, and Nazi genocides and colonialism. Smith’s almost exclusive centering of his story on Germany, Europe, and the eastern front is surprising, given the laudable global reach of his edited *Oxford Handbook of German History*. Even though the German genocide of the Nama and Herero in Africa from 1904 to 1906 had no direct relationship with the genocidal policies of the Nazis against Jews and others, some connections certainly exist. Smith only briefly mentions the connection between the Nazi plans for colonization, enslavement, and extermination in Eastern Europe and the Holocaust. But the Nazi atrocities occurred within an even larger context of a European and global history of ethnic cleansing and genocide—what Kushner called a transnational history of refugees and of the

Holocaust that “cover[s] all parts of the planet.”¹⁰ Pergher and Roseman called the Holocaust an imperial pan-European project.¹¹ Smith does not discuss these colonial and imperial matters, despite their significance not only for understanding the persecution and extermination of the Jews but also for understanding the new, redefined ways in which Germans experienced the nation in the Third Reich.

We can elucidate Smith’s story of the Third Reich as a historical problem of scale. We need to know why Germans accepted the evolution of the nation into a murderous empire between 1933 and 1945, and what that transformation meant to them. As Trivellato observed regarding microhistory and the history of scales, “The variation of scale was a tool to search for new, unsettling answers.” Revel encapsulated the ironic potential of this tool with the maxim, “Pourquoi faire simple quand on peut faire compliqué?” (Why make it simple when you can make it complicated?).¹² Smith’s narrative about the German experience and imagination of the nation during the Third Reich, and about the Holocaust, is too simple.

Smith’s use of the voices of the perpetrators and of the victims in his narrative of the persecution and extermination of the Jews is in many ways exemplary. He has an eye for the right anecdote, and the right tone to carry moral weight. But his narrative is too familiar to challenge our perceptions. Several years ago, Goldberg, in a review of Friedländer’s *Nazi Germany and the Jews, 1939–1945: The Years of Extermination* (New York, 2007), identified the characteristics of a dominant Holocaust narration: “In our culture the excessive voices of the victims have exchanged their epistemological, ontological, and ethical revolutionary function for an aesthetic one. They operate according to the pleasure principle in order to bring us, consumer of Holocaust images, the most expected image of the ‘unimaginable,’ which therefore generates a melancholic pleasure. . . . In the current culture these voices produce . . . pleasurable identification with human suffering according to familiar and expected protocols.”¹³

10 Tony Kushner, *Journeys from the Abyss: The Holocaust and Forced Migration from the 1880s to the Present* (Liverpool, 2018), 32.

11 Roberta Pergher and Mark Roseman, “The Holocaust—an Imperial Genocide?” *Dapim: Studies on the Holocaust*, XXVII (2013), 42–49.

12 Francesca Trivellato, “Microstoria/Microhistoire/Microhistory,” *French Politics, Culture & Society*, XXXIII (2015), 130.

13 Amos Goldberg, “The Victim’s Voice and Melodramatic Aesthetics in History,” *History and Theory*, XLVIII (2009), 229–230.

There is nothing wrong in this kind of a Holocaust account, but we should be aware of what it can and cannot do anymore in terms of historical analysis.

We can approach this issue via the notions of empathy and sympathy. Kohut, a historian of Germany and a psychotherapist by training, recently published an illuminating book about empathy and historical understanding that historians would do well to read. Historians can use the notion of empathy to imagine and reconstruct how and why the world made sense to the people that they study. Empathy “is a way of knowing, a mode of observation and an observational vantage point. . . . [A]n empathic historical approach shifts the balance of power in favor of the past, ceding more authority to the people of the past, their perceptions, experiences and feelings. . . . Empathic history illuminates possibility and contingency, not what ultimately happened but what might have occurred.”¹⁴

Empathy is definitely not sympathy. Empathy in historical reconstruction recognizes that the differences of people in the past from those in the present require proper understanding. Sympathy is about allegiance and identification. “When I empathize,” writes Kohut, “I seek to adopt in my imagination the position of the other; when I sympathize, I regard and react to the other from my own autonomous position. In a nutshell, empathy is feeling *with*; sympathy is feeling *for*.”¹⁵ On the spectrum between empathy and sympathy, as defined by Kohut, the discussion of the Third Reich in Smith’s book has tilted, imperceptibly, to the sympathy side, giving primacy to the horror about atrocities at the expense of explanation. As noted above, such a history is perfectly legitimate; the historical discipline is an art with many narratives. But the world of Nazi Germany—totalitarian, expansive, murderous, and obsessed with antisemitism, as well as the attachment to nation under the Third Reich—and why it made sense to Germans is obscured in Smith’s “melodramatic aesthetic” account. By putting the Holocaust at the center of his story, Smith’s history largely reflects current sensibilities about the Third Reich and the Holocaust much more than the world that the Germans inhabited during the Holocaust. It is not so much an explanation of the radical nationalism of the Third Reich as a site of memory for the Holocaust and Nazi crimes.

14 Thomas Kohut, *Empathy and the Historical Understanding of the Human Past* (London, 2020), 4.

15 *Ibid.*, 48.

The fact that the dominant topic in the book for the period after 1945 concerns coming to terms with this memory makes sense because this topic has come to define postwar Germany, although the exclusion of East Germany is not convincing, and the hegemony of the memory topic comes at the expense of painting a richer portrait of West Germany. Nor does Smith's frequent resort to polls to gauge "changing mentalities" carry the requisite evidentiary and interpretive weight (411), though the narrative red thread of the "presence of compassion" is effective and poetic. Smith's discussion places some of the problems with the narrative of the Third Reich in sharp relief. He points out that during the 1950s, the early years of the Federal Republic, "sympathy for the Third Reich remained profound and reached across the political spectrum" (427); 57 percent of the Germans polled affirmed that "National Socialism was a good idea but was carried out badly" (427). This lingering positive attachment to the Nazi period, in tension with the murderous character of German society, is one element missing from the discussion of the Third Reich. At the same time, Germans' attachment to the Third Reich in the 1950s adds credence to Smith's observation about the profound achievement of German society in the following decades to acknowledge and remember the genocide.

Germany: A Nation and Its Time is now the first port of call for German nationhood across the centuries. In its attempt to explore the nation in its time, it reminds us that not all pasts are created equal and that earlier periods of the German nation may feel to us anchored in the past more resolutely than does the Third Reich. It also reminds us that even though historians are determined to explore the past within its own specific context, they can never be disconnected from their own specific context. They write history, and they write the present at the same time.

